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Swanson students join Wossman for special track meet

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Carolyn Atkins, director of Swanson Youth Correctional Center, wants the public to know her students are as normal as any students from other area schools.

To that end, Atkins arranged for a group of her students, dubbed the "Panthers" of "Southside Alternative School," to participate in a track meet Friday afternoon at Wossman High School.

"We are the Panthers, prowling for knowledge," Atkins happily announced.

Atkins said Friday's meet was a good chance for her students, competing under the name "Southside High," to take part in athletic competition.

"This is the first time any of our kids have been able to do anything like this," Atkins said. "To my understanding, years ago, Swanson had put together some teams, but it never stuck."

Atkins said she challenged her staff to put together Swanson's track team, which began about a month ago.

"The kids have been totally involved," Atkins said. "They love it. My kids have been exceeding their own expectations."

Atkins said Swanson employees collaborated and put their money together to buy uniforms for the students.

"They got about \$800 together and bought track shoes and uniforms for them," Atkins said. "We started off with a donation of \$150. They're ready to play and try to win."

Atkins said 24 students were chosen to participate in the meet. Along with Swanson and Wossman's squads, track teams from Bastrop High School, West Ouachita High School, Carroll High School, Richwood High School and Green Oaks Detention Center in Morehouse Parish participated in the meet.

Atkins said the students were trained by some of Swanson's employees and Detrick Massey, an assistant from Wossman's track team. She said everyone volunteered on their own time.

"It's been a great experience," Massey said. "These kids are incredible."

Massey said "Southside" placed first in the 800 meter run. Atkins said the team chose "Panthers" as their nickname.

"What I'm trying to do on campus is create as much of a real high school atmosphere as possible," Atkins said. "I don't want our kids to feel any different than other high school kids."

Atkins said the meet gives other people the chance to see her kids as regular students.

"Our kids come from all over the community," Atkins said. "They come from schools just like the ones we're competing against. They're kids who make mistakes, like any other kid."

Atkins said she is not stopping with a track team and hopes to put together a softball team at Swanson soon.